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Řeč přírody a věcí v poezii Medbh McGuckian

The Speech of Nature and Objects in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian

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Introduction

Northern Irish, a woman, a human being, and above all part of nature, Medbh McGuckian has been writing and publishing poetry since the 1980s. She was born in Belfast in 1952, and here she also studied and has settled and lived with her family. As a prolific author, McGuckian has published nine collections of poems to date. This large output may tempt us to find different kinds of authors behind different parts of her work while we listen sometimes to a nationalist voice, sometimes to a feminist one. The other reason for this varied poetic voice may be the indefiniteness of meanings and relationships within single poems themselves, the author's open and never precisely directed invitation to their content.

There are different critical attitudes towards the author. Some people hear her Irish mind speaking, for others the female power pervades the poems,¹ or a mother entangles her experience and affection into the verse.² Nevertheless, Medbh McGuckian is an author who is able to raise different conceptions and evoke different meanings in her poems, and who, despite having written such a large amount of poems with such various focuses, talks through only one voice. In this voice all the possible authors of her pen fuse into one specific view of reality. In the following pages, I would like to emphasize this unique personal expression of the author, which seems to embrace and unify all the different concerns in their variety.

The inner spirit of Medbh McGuckian's poetry is thus asserted by means of many themes within her work, some of them more general, others very personal or concrete. In her first published collection of poems, *The Flower Master* (1993), she is concerned with seasons of life³ and different expectations. Another very frequent topic in her books is the tension between feminine and masculine principles. The notion of the language itself and its potential appears in *Shelmalier* (1998), and ideas about the natural order are widely developed in *The Face of the Earth* (2002). As far as the more concrete and topical issues are concerned, Irish identity and different political themes

¹ Michael Allen, 'The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', in. *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993) 303

² Guinn Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleánain and the Body of the Nation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 181

³ Allen 289

are dealt with in *Had I A Thousand Lives* (2003) and *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001), and the personal issues of McGuckian's father's death and her daughter's injury are to be found in other collections of poems.

These particular topics, however, do not make up the only or main meaning in the poems, but seem to play their role in relation to the complex spirit of Medbh McGuckian's poetry and the reality it conjures up. Dealing with different issues and disclosing her personal approach towards different phenomena and situations, her work as a larger whole offers an unusual concept of the order of things. In the reality of McGuckian's poems, human surroundings seem to have a very special relationship with the inner world of human feelings. The environment does not exist as an external element that can be used merely as an ordinary metaphor or as a field for the projection of human sensations, but the seemingly external reality of a person becomes part of the human self. The particular topics of the poems are included in this specific reality created in the poetry.

In my thesis, I will not concentrate on the individual topics themselves, whether it be violence in Ireland, the loss of persons dear to the author or cycles of seasons, but I will try to concentrate on the author's poetic method which encompasses and unites them. The discussion of the method should bring us to a better understanding of McGuckian's view and treatment of reality, which overwhelms her various concerns, is mutually connected with figures and tropes of the poems and enriches also the perception of their contents and focuses. Let the discussion be opened by extracts from the poem 'The Worship of the Plough', which offer an example of the relationship between the particular theme and her idiosyncratic view of the external world, of the topic in focus.

Only old women like the colour
of deep water, when the body is thrown
into a running stream and becomes
the ghost of a childless person.

A coil of twigs brushing out
the sowing basket like fluid opium
into a catch basin, as soon as possible
before noon, before the rice flower forms,

drives the waterfull into
the absolutely level field,
a field left vacant in me.

Well-white and smooth.

...

trees look their best,
half wearing the produce
of one field less desired
if you weed your fields in me.⁴

When reading any poem we can ask the question: What is the poem about? There is of course never just one single answer, nor any limited range of possible interpretations, but the poem can be approached with completely different focuses. We can concentrate on the complex metaphor, which in the course of the whole poem

⁴ Medbh McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2002) 16

mirrors a woman's struggle with her sense of bareness, her unused fertility. On one level, this sensation is pictured for example by metaphors of "childlessness" and "vacant field"; on the second level, these metaphors are further developed into an allegorical story, in which a seed is carried to the field and sown. In the closing lines of the poem, this already green field is surpassed by the desire for a field that would be weeded by another person. A different approach to the poem could be made through the observation of particular metaphorical expressions, in which the natural world and its processes are able to communicate the human sensation or situation ("colour of deep water", "sow basket").

Nevertheless, apart from pondering the theme and content of 'The Worship of the Plough', the question of existential fulfilment, women's spiritual fertility or human communication, we can examine the very process of McGuckian's handling of the theme, her way of expressing human problems and her treatment of the surrounding environment as a metaphor. The persona in the poem uses images from nature and the everyday human environment not merely to create metaphors as bridges between two different worlds, but she rather figures the relationship between the human and the inhuman element as a free communication within the common reality ("Only old women like the colour / of deep water, when the body is thrown/ into a running stream"). By this I mean that the division between the inner world of human emotion and the physical world is removed, and McGuckian's poetry moves fluently between the two.

In this thesis, I would like to explain my concept of Medbh McGuckian's view of reality and her work with metaphor and other tropes. I will not ask what the poems are about, but what kind of perception of the world is suggested in their lines. I will try to read them along with their assertion of a deeper link between the external natural world and the inner world of the human self, along with their articulation of natural forces, human history and individual persons merging into one spirit and order.

The path to a better understanding of Medbh McGuckian's view of the self's position in reality leads through an explanation of the different characteristic features of the poems, towards an attempt to capture the more complex meaning of the poetry. This in turn will throw new light back on its individual aspects and themes. The path will also follow the wider impact and implications of my interpretation on the mutual

relationships between different features of the verse, and involve discussion about the poetry's comprehensibility along with the widely pondered question of its obscurity⁵. I will try to approach McGuckian's poetry not as the verse of a contemporary Irish poet or an account of a domesticated mother and adult daughter, but I will read it focusing on McGuckian's particular personal view of things and relationships within everyday life, which links the poems as parts of a whole and transcends the variety of individual issues of her poetry.

⁵ Allen 288, Batten 176

Literary and Cultural Background of the Poetry

In the introduction I suggested my emphasis on the importance of McGuckian's purely personal attitude towards the reflection of human experience and description of various sensations, and explained that my interpretation of her poetry will ascribe a mere secondary role to the concrete themes. Nevertheless, even with our attention fully on the poet as an individual spirit and not as a voice tied to certain problems, culture, tradition or status, we cannot avoid a brief consideration of these backgrounds when dealing with the personal poetic world of the author. The social background provides at least the concrete topics to the poems and becomes field for self-reflection; particular stages of author's life serve even within my conception as building material and means of asserting McGuckian's distinctive approaches. The background of the literary work cannot be forgotten, because it is the author's connection to the surrounding world. It leads her to her perception of reality, or it can just reflect her perception of its deeper relationships, or it can be perceived as a single possible tool of feeling and expressing her view of the world. By all means, the link of the background with the created order of things, which is reflected in the poems, is undisputedly very complex and important, and thus impossible to neglect completely in my observation.

With respect to the relevance of the poet's external literary as well as social and personal environment for her poetic expression, I will try to briefly introduce Medbh McGuckian in the wider contemporary Irish literary context. Even this general introduction will attempt, though, to keep its direction in accordance with my thesis, and follow thus a connection to my concept of Medbh McGuckian's specific projection of reality. When labelling the author a contemporary woman Irish poet, different paths of approach to the background for her verse arise. I will offer some of them and try to link them with my own observations of McGuckian's work.

In her essay on the new wave in Irish poetry, Eavan Boland suggests that poetry has always been some negotiation between inner and outer world, it has been the poet's struggle to confront his or her individual impressions with expectations arising from the

very role of being a poet of a certain society.⁶ Even a cursory consideration of recent history of Irish poetry reveals that this negotiation: that is, the poet's attitude towards the relationship between his or her inner personal world and the outer cultural situation, changes in the course of time. Different tendencies accompanying the development of the Irish poem throughout the twentieth century are outlined by Declan Kiberd in the introduction to his selection of contemporary Irish poetry.⁷ Poets of this recent time are distinguished by following the specific and very prolific period of the Irish Revival and anti-Revival poetry and by living in new, modern, changed Ireland. Their work is inseparably tied with their public position, and they are introduced and discussed as members of a certain tradition and voices of a certain culture.⁸ Modern poets can continue, can refuse, can ironise or parody the previous tendencies and reactions to the tradition, but they always have to respond somehow to it, be part of it.

It is impossible and probably also undesirable for an author to forget his or her cultural background completely. Nevertheless, the social, historical, and political situation can be observed in its relationship to the more general, deeper and more independent meaning in the poems. At the same time, a poet can be regarded on the one hand as determined by his or her social or private situation, and on the other hand as disentangled from this determination and able to acquire a distance from it and to transcend it in poetic expression. In spite of being a product of the particular age, in a sense, the poet can reflect the age independently or prefer his or her personal problems to the general questions and tendencies of the particular period, and thus transgress its accepted views of reality.

Medbh McGuckian herself belongs to the authors of the second half of the twentieth century whose work is in general characterized as more personal by Kiberd.⁹ Their response to the social situation is considered less direct, and the work itself is regarded as a creative element of the political and cultural background rather than its reflection. Within this tendency, the negotiation between the inner and the outer world seems to have shifted from an explicit reaction to the contemporary Irish situation

⁶ Eavan Boland, 'Born in the 50's; Irish Poets of the Global Village', in *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, ed. Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 137

⁷ Declan Kiberd, 'Contemporary Irish Poetry', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 1309

⁸ Kiberd 1312

⁹ Kiberd 1316

towards a less direct synthesis of the tradition and the current situation in Ireland, or towards accepting the background and familiar cultural situation as a path to the more general relationships in the world. And this is also the approach that I would like to observe and appreciate in Medbh McGuckian's literary work.

The very fact of being a woman poet creates certain expectations of McGuckian's work, and establishes a certain position for her in the literary world. What role did a woman who wrote poems in recent Irish literary history have? When Eavan Boland tries to put a frame on the kind of poetic negotiation between "the inner world" and "the outer world" in the late twentieth century--that is, to form a frame for the contemporary dialogue between Irish poetry and Irish society--she does not hesitate to discuss widely both the elements that are believed to provide a guide for the reception of McGuckian's poetry, being Irish and being a woman. When Boland ponders the slow change that recent Irish poetry experienced, showing up the erosions of time and innovation, she believes that the poetry of women has performed the greatest change.¹⁰ The very visibility of female poets, which increased during the twentieth century, seems to have had a very complex impact on Irish literature. Not only has it raised new issues within the poems themselves, but women's poetry has influenced the whole shape of contemporary poetry in Ireland.

What has women's verse brought into the Irish literary situation apart from the very fact that it became visible? In what way is it specific? The explanation of the particular characteristics of the women's poetry and its impact on the literary environment can be partially found in the previous social and cultural position of women. Guinn Batten understands them as "doubly estranged" due to gender bias and the lack of power in the postcolonial period.¹¹ From this position, women poets, after abandoning silence, reveal gaps in the understanding of the past, and offer a kind of revaluation of the nation. After their silence during the male poet's domination in the artistic environment, women bring new aesthetic modes and approaches to their native culture.¹² Concerning the particular themes in women poetry, Boland mentions the specific concept of justice, new imagery, and issues of the feminine principle and

¹⁰ Boland 137 - 142

¹¹ Guinn Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleánain and the Body of the Nation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 171

¹² Batten 174

gender itself.¹³ Nevertheless, what is to be emphasized is the very relationship to the basic question of the individual poet's position within a culture. Women's poetry with its different perception of the environment disclosed a new kind of contract between the private and the public, offered a new shape of the poem itself.

The fresh voice of women must have stirred the still state of the previous literary environment, which Boland describes as a state of inwardness and which some may have considered conservative,¹⁴ with a completely new energy. Together with other female poets, McGuckian has enriched and reshaped themes and questions in modern Irish poetry, and she has contributed to the understanding of the poet's situation in general, which is aptly called "a balance between a private vision and external forces" by Boland.¹⁵

The question of women's poetry as a fresh element in Irish literature is closely tied with the perception of the Irish poet as "national spirit", a voice that belongs to the nation and its culture.¹⁶ In Murphy's concept of recent Irish literary history, the position of the poet as a medium expressing Irish themes is very clearly suggested. The writer is believed to be subjected to a tension between the urge to express private concerns and culturally disengaged views and between his or her sense of faithfulness to national identity and legacy.

McGuckian engages the national theme on various levels. Naturally, it penetrates her whole work implicitly as the background of her life and experience, but several themes that are explicitly tied with Irish identity have become central to many of McGuckian's poems. The view of hopelessness in Northern Ireland and issues of conflict between the two Irish identities appear in her work very frequently. McGuckian conveys historical meanings by identifying herself with the dead, by introducing ghost heroes of the past, and in *Shelmaliere* she lets Irish martyrs speak through her.¹⁷ This approach has gained the label of "special personal awakening to the history of Irish

¹³ Boland 141 - 142

¹⁴ Boland 146

¹⁵ Boland 137

¹⁶ Batten 189

¹⁷ Batten 180

nationalism” by Guinn Batten,¹⁸ and to me it seems to be entangled with the more general characteristics of her poems, which I am going to discuss later, that is with the concept of human body as a vehicle for reincarnation of spirit, either human or inhuman.

The question of the sense of a poet’s role in the nation, and of the fusion between private and public discourse, which is described by Shane Murphy,¹⁹ acquires a new direction with McGuckian’s oblique approach to issues of national memory and Irish political identity. Although the typical contemporary departure from the previous sense of faithfulness to the Irish questions can be observed in a great deal of her poetry that follows purely private and generally human questions, McGuckian is a nationalist poet. Murphy discusses the specific character of the author’s nationalist approach. He suggests the fact that her treatment of Irish problems transcends the thematic level, and is distinguished by the sense of social responsibility, but not a burden of obligation, to respond to the problems, for example in *Drawing Ballerinas*. She examines the very roots of conflicts when reconstructing lives of Irish figures or when musing on historical events.²⁰ In individual poems and accounts of particular situations she seems to look further back to society as a whole and thus to a human being as an organic part of its mosaic.

Men and men and men crowd at a stretch of water

washing their clothes, with vague faces,

with defined bodies, all different phases

of the same man. You open and shut

your breast, the rudiments of musketry,

¹⁸ Batten 180

¹⁹ Shane Murphy, ‘Sonnets, Centos and Long Lines: Muldoon, Paulin ,McGuckian and Carson’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 190

²⁰ Murphy 201

bayonet fighting, squad drill. ...²¹

In McGuckian's approach to national issues with respect to general human questions, I find a great similarity to her specific treatment of private relationships and the link between the particular and the general in her whole work. Nevertheless, this observation is to be left for later discussion in next chapters.

In the Irish context, the bond between the poem and the national body seems to be very firm, and Guinn Batten does not hesitate to emphasize and develop the concept of the Irish poet as a "body of the nation".²² She reminds us of the fact that Irish cultural nationalism often defined the poet as the national hero, and suggests that due to the Ireland's particular literary history, the close relation between the politics and poetics has survived. When dealing with the question of the private voice of an author and of his or her national consciousness, she accepts the figure of a representative poet with his or her generally Irish voice being superior to the personality, and she interprets the national spirit of the individual as an important and omnipresent element in the Irish literary tradition. The Irish poet begins with conveying his or her individual views and questions, but ends up unconsciously representing the body of the nation.²³ Within this concept, the woman poet appears to have a special position with the assertion of her feminine national power, and within women's poetry itself, Medbh McGuckian has a special position with her introduction of the unusual private view of world. Her attitude and her literary work may be perceived as a plant growing on and dependent on Irish ground, and equally, the complex Irish situation becomes enriched, influenced, changed by her tribute, no matter how directly the mutual link between the personal ideas and the external situation is expressed in the poems themselves.

²¹ Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1994) 70

²² Batten 169

²³ Batten 169 - 170

McGuckian's World and Her Poetic Methods

In the preceding pages I tried to explain the choice I have made in my approach to Medbh McGuckian's poems and suggested that I will focus on her unique method of expression and poetic composition, which unifies the immense variety of poems, and on her worldview, which accompanies the method. I have also outlined some other individual approaches to McGuckian's poetry and tried to establish a link between them and my close readings. I now wish to explain and develop my own interpretation of the poetry across its different themes. In this chapter, I am going to introduce my observations concerning the characteristics of McGuckian's verse, and to discuss some of its common features, which contribute to my concluding interpretation of the author's view of the world as expressed in the poems.

The author's poetic method and perception throws light on particular parts of her work, and vice versa, the particular poems show features and ideas that lead to a closer and deeper comprehension of the author's complex personal views. At the outset of my discussion I therefore wish to deal with a poem which will illustrate my point.

The Melusine

We had left the village's dilapidated fort,
where the ill-ceiled theatre was dark,
and tried becoming wild again, wintering
for the first time on the island.

An ordinary night, a cool hour,
we walked the shell sands,
till a perforated shell in the roof
of your eye and the heel of your hand

forced a bird-call with a human
coating, a voice of coal or leather,
into a devil's agreement with clay.
Like a sealed vessel, Christ's hymen,

she wanted to communicate
through windowpanes of white paper,
her tails curled up at either side,
their fins held at shoulder level.

Without unwrapping the additional
meaning of her unfired kiss
we could look out through her thoughts
that brightened the river like April.²⁴

This poem from the recent collection *The Currach Requires No Harbours* (2006), like many other poems by McGuckian, opens with a particular scene or action. The persons set off for wintering out and walk in the cool night. Later on, the scene recedes to the background, and the verse fills with metaphors and develops an experience or a sensation which is initially bound to the scene, but the link gradually loosens, and the sensation becomes independent of its origin, of the concrete action. A strange call is heard and depicted with an unusual metaphor of “a voice of coal and

²⁴ Medbh McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2006) 68

leather". It is the Melusine, a mythical creature who usually lingers around people's chimneys in winter. Nevertheless, the appearance of her figure does not merely continue the story of the walking people, but it enriches the night's adventure with a metaphorical level. What ensues is an allegorical encounter with the folk-tale figure ("her tails curled up at either side, / their fins held at shoulder level), which suppresses the initial scene and mediates the human closeness to the mythical spirit of the Melusine. The winter night lets the speaker's mind recall the figure from folklore and fill the surrounding nature with its spiritual content. The final lines develop the sensation of the natural world as part of the persona's inner world. The communication with nature, with its inhabitant, suggests the intimacy between human and inhuman spirits ("we could look out through her thoughts / that brightened the river like April"). This example of a human communicating with natural forces and elements illustrates the author's approach to the surrounding environment not as something external to the self, but as a continuous field in which common spiritual experience occurs.

The author's particular approach to her surroundings seems to penetrate, in one form or other, all the periods of her work, and I find it crucial for further analysis of her verse, poetic method, and view of the world. I share Guinn Batten's impression that the objects surrounding her enclose the author and speak through her.²⁵ She bases it on McGuckian's approach to the past and its figures that she lets be reincarnated through her while trying to express their positions. Nevertheless, I find the author's openness to the outer elements and their nature and spirit working on a more general level, and I would like to try to widen the concept of metamorphosis, of other voices speaking through her, to the inorganic part of the author's surroundings, as well. The relationship between her person and her physical environment seems to be profound and complex, indeed, and I suggest its several aspects at this stage.

Even if we do not concentrate on discovering the function or deeper meaning of the object's descriptions in our reading of the poems, they cannot fail to astonish us by their originality, freshness, and vividness.

... The lip

²⁵ Batten 182

of the cup bends over
and assumes the shape of leaves
that retreat inward in a half circle
as if giving way to each other in a dance.²⁶

In McGuckian's verse, the objects accompanying a person's stay in reality are worth richer description and understanding than they are normally given. As I have already mentioned, the surroundings seem to be emphasized as an integrated, organic part of one's life ("meaning of her unfired kiss"²⁷). They are part of a symbiosis of feelings, sensations, ideas, and decisions. The boundary between human experience and the object's characteristics is suppressed or perhaps just non-existent, in the poems, and the object thus acquires an attribute that we would usually encounter only in human world ("a living argument beneath an agreed window"²⁸). The object becomes part of the human introspective arena and inter-human communication.

The objects of everyday reality often acquire an adjective of a very complex or even baffling meaning. The author tears down the boundary between her private inner world and the world that surrounds her, by her open, sensitive and imaginative communication with objects. Personae in poems do not imagine intimate feelings as confined within the self's own world, but communicate them by objects as well as with objects of the surrounding environment. It is hard to distinguish between the projection of the speaker's own feeling and experience onto the perceived external reality and a kind of self-involved interview with this reality. In the coexistence of these two relationships between the self and the environment, I find one of the main specific features of McGuckian's approach towards the position of a human mind in the surrounding reality. Her poetic expression neglects the conventional division between the human and inanimate characteristics, attributes and abilities. It brings inorganic objects to life (or perhaps reveals the life hidden in them) and provides them with the

²⁶ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 60

²⁷ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 68

²⁸ Medbh McGuckian, *Shelmaliar* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1998) 41

honour of expressing speaker's sensations by means of original metaphors ("Unwinding the bitter onion - / its layers of uncertainty are limited"²⁹, "Our childless house has perfect teeth"³⁰, "House without eyebrows"³¹) or similes:

I keep seeing birds

that could be you when you stretch out

like a syllable and look to me

as if I could give you wings.³²

The description of an object contains more than a mere sensitive expression of its nature. The way it is modified provides the object with a large space of meaning within its link and communication with the author's persona. Very often, the description of an object contains her actual feeling wound up in a metaphor ("Flame propping up my underflesh"³³).

Very frequently, the speaker's feeling and external reality merge in accordance with the connection of the title or explicit theme of the poem to the more profound meaning of the poem ('The Book Room', 'The Sunbench', or 'Stone Orchard'). For instance, 'Stone Orchard' meditates upon this astonishing place. Nevertheless, the very sensitive description not only tears the individual characteristics of the place out of the premises of the inorganic senseless world ("your cleanworld of memory / has no surface"³⁴), but also develops and widens meanings of the characteristics of the place by suffusing it with human experience ("Your heart / is the slight branch by which alone / the trees gain height"³⁵). In 'The Sunbench' the relationship between the object and the speaker is of a different kind and could be considered more explicit. The sunbench itself

²⁹ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1993) 17

³⁰ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 34

³¹ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 27

³² McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 64

³³ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 16

³⁴ McGuckian, *Shelmaliar* 115

³⁵ McGuckian, *Shelmaliar* 115

is not the centre of the poet's attention, but performs the important role of reminding her of a personal experience; it is an impetus for further thinking, or an element for projection and embodiment of the personal sensation. The object provides a parallel to human feeling, and accommodates thoughts ("Shaking off the night's week appetite / The sunbench brown and draining into follow"³⁶).

In other poems, the theme itself introduces a straightforward communication between the person and her surroundings. 'The Book Room' touches upon the persona's intimate relationship to the room describing its influence on her presence inside ("The grey that is so kind as you come in"³⁷). It is a subtle, sensitive observation of the mutual relationship of a human being and a room. Another communication between the human and the inanimate element is depicted in 'Springwater'. This poem describes the nature of springwater, and deals with its power and influence upon the human participant of the interview ("Her fingers so curiously under your breath"³⁸). In all these different instances, the author's conveys her close personal relationship to the surrounding environment and expresses her sense of not only physical but also spiritual sharing of the reality by human and inhuman elements. In her view, the human self-reflection is interwoven with outer reality, which can thus participate in communication with the human spirit.

McGuckian invites other participants of everyday events to become alive when being noticed and observed. The character of this resurrection of inorganic things is quite similar to the way she makes other human beings speak through her. I have already mentioned Guinn Batten's discussion of ghosts that become reincarnated in McGuckian's poetry and speak through her mind, particularly in *Shelmalier* (1998),³⁹ and I would like to add to this interpretation some of my personal observations based upon wider range of poems' themes. I will attempt to broaden the field of the concept of reincarnation in McGuckian's work and let it include inorganic voices as well.

Several poems in *Captain Lavender* (1994) offer a touch of the past while musing upon violent situations in Ireland. However, in accordance with the author's concern with political issues as elements of complex human and social laws, history is

³⁶ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 39

³⁷ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991) 46

³⁸ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* 20

³⁹ Batten 182

not considered a mere collection of events, but has its own spirit, which is voiced through the speaker's personal experience.

Last year's honey, ill-preserved, bitter beyond

all sweetening, is set down by another point

inardity, but drawn here by your longing.

...

Blood leaves

your hands, your feet, your limbs, and flows

back to your heart like a cold change in the room.⁴⁰

Very often, the speaker's personal knowledge interferes with the knowledge of the past ("Waking opposite your neckfires, my pushed mind / slept. You stepped faster than spring, defeating / that love that swears itself undying"⁴¹). The personal element enables the past situation to reawaken with its wider reflection of human reality and gain meaning not of pure history, but of a fusion of the past and the present. This link between the already experienced and the contemporary is emphasized by McGuckian for example in the poem 'Captain Lavender'.

We are half-taught

our real names, from other lives.

⁴⁰ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 70

⁴¹ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 70

Emphasize your eyes. Be my flare-
path, my uncold begetter,
my air-minded birdsense.⁴²

In McGuckian's poems commemorating past events, no boundary is built between the past and present realities, but the experience is shared by both ages. They do not meet as strangers to exchange their knowledge of people, but are naturally mingled within our reality. This attitude appears to be the basis for the author's method of reincarnation.

In making this conclusion I wish to recall my previous mention of the integrated worlds of human and inorganic realities. Nevertheless, before discussing their entanglement, I would like to pay attention to the communication between two human realities for a while, and discuss the projection of other people's lives into McGuckian's verse. This projection seems to be of a similar kind to her resurrection of dead heroes and past spirits, and is at the same time very close to her unusual descriptions of objects, which are then able to speak, as discussed before.

I watch her breathing, its intense pause,
its torture. We share the beginning,
the length, the end of a breath together
like the joint journeyings
of the very young with the very old.

This is the only conversation

⁴² McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 76

the tree giving birth can break into,
more of her than she usually allows,
not to close the stair's meaning too soon.⁴³

This extract from a poem called 'Footplate', which deals with the author's daughter's illness, reflects Medbh McGuckian's symbiosis with a person dear to her. We can see a subtle play with the momentary physical closeness to the daughter and the profound spiritual intercourse of the two persons' minds.

In other poems devoted to the author's affection for her close relatives, she speaks about her relationship to the person more directly ("I would revive you with a swallow's nest...I would sedate your eyes with rippleseed, those / Hollow points that close as if / Your eyelids had been severed... I would fill your mouth with rice and mussels"⁴⁴). In 'To my Grandmother' she welcomes the grandmother's spirit into own inner world, and feels her mind embodied within herself. Such welcome of another mind is often similar to the subtle imaginative descriptions of inorganic surroundings ("My mother's smell is sweet or sour and moist like a soft red cover of the apple... No one knows what goes on inside a clock"⁴⁵). The mutual closeness of meditations upon a person and upon an object in McGuckian's work implies a kind of promotion of the object's power, meaning, and role in human life, and this promotion deserves a more detailed description.

When examining the relationship of the speaker to the individual elements of the surroundings, it is interesting to notice the position of an object in relation to the topic, tension, and development of a poem. In his brief introduction to McGuckian's poetry, Declan Kiberd emphasizes the original poetic method of the author, who "begins with the image and tries to infer from it an inkling of a distant world".⁴⁶ McGuckian's method of composing poems very often involves a particular scene, person, metaphor, or an object that serve as a real or seeming impetus for import of further, personal

⁴³ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 50

⁴⁴ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 26

⁴⁵ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 23

⁴⁶ Kiberd 1410

elements into the poem. It is thus possible to discover many hidden relationships between the bench, stream or garden and the persona's feeling and psychic situation, and the initial scene or object gains a complex meaning. It is not actually the object or place that is described, but the human experience that is mirrored in the description ("Lost earrings, / a dash of acrid green / in the wrong time of the year"⁴⁷) and the border between the personal and the external reality is thus transcended.

An example of a poem with a particular scene or situation shaping its initial image would be 'The Sofa'.

This weather--drinking champagne
on yellow satin, with gold forget-me-nots -
is unknown to me.

...

They tell me something very warm,
something about a friend's life,
that fertile hour--that he had not,
then, been nothing; but they do not die,
as I do, with my air of rings widening,
or Satan joining my sentences
like two beginning lovers, with his hoof.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 28

⁴⁸ McGuckian, *Shelmalier* 20

The author begins by introducing a concrete situation, an action, but ends up having imported the most private and abstract, or rather purely personal and disinterested connotations and feelings, into the poem's lines. Similarly, in 'Lemon with White Jug' the closing lines enrich the poem, which opens with a scene on a ship, with much deeper meaning ("While love and its technologies / drinks the working day from your palms"⁴⁹). Next to the instance or situation, an image of a person close to the poet can introduce the chain of thoughts up to the revelation of the speaker's actual despair of being left aside ("Your eyes were ever brown, the colour / Of time's submissiveness... I remembered all your slender but / Persistent volume said, friendly, complex / As the needs of your new and childfree girl"⁵⁰). Also an object meditated upon can launch further connotations and a gradual unusual expression of a personal state or experience. Such progress from a concrete image to a more general and complicated meaning can be traced in the already mentioned 'Springwater' ("I press the italics of her soul / Between yours and mine, / Till her throat whitens"⁵¹) and 'The Melusine' ("Without unwrapping the additional / meaning of her unfired kiss / we could look out through her thoughts / that brightened the river like April"⁵²). A new idea or personal experience is included in the final lines, which is often very hard to comprehend.

The position and relationship of the object to the theme differs from poem to poem. Nevertheless, in most cases, the expression of personal experience by means of its observation seems to be based not on the projection of the writer's feelings into the concrete natural or inorganic element, but rather on borrowing of laws and spirit of nature for understanding human feelings ("August and the second half of the year / that has never lived either in me / or with me / re-opens eyes"⁵³). The borrowing enables her to grasp the sensation, to develop it verbally; the metaphor provides richer language for description of the personal state. The object is treated with immense care and awe in all McGuckian's poems, and cannot be considered a mere inorganic element separated from the human self.

The object appears to play different roles within the structure of a poem. It is a target for observation, a starting point of a chain of associations, but it can also appear

⁴⁹ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 67

⁵⁰ Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2006) 354

⁵¹ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* 20

⁵² McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 68

⁵³ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 44

in the title of a poem only and become an implicit, veiled counterpart of its plot or content ('The Sofa'⁵⁴, 'The Swing'⁵⁵). The thing that gives title to the poem does not have to be mentioned within its lines at all, but can be tied with the poem by an indirect relationship or a hidden private connotation, which can remain partially or completely concealed to the reader without the least impoverishment of the poem, in my opinion. In other cases, the title bearing the name of a thing stands for a clear metaphorical reference to the content of a poem, and completes thus the sensation confined to its lines ('Unused Water'⁵⁶).

Despite the variety of roles of surrounding reality in McGuckian's poems, the constant value and relevance of the environment is ensured by its entanglement with the author's self. What is so particular about her view is the naturally accepted, not just physical, but also spiritual symbiosis of human life and the surrounding environment. The persona of the author is inseparably tied with natural processes and a more universal order of things that unites its human and inhuman elements without any boundaries.

The sea is made to repeat little phrases

such as 'the moon is pretty'

from all its wakeful windows.

August and the second half of the year

that has never lived either in me

or with me

⁵⁴ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 25

⁵⁵ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 38

⁵⁶ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 28

re-opens eyes⁵⁷

The mutual entanglement with the surroundings and the possibility to communicate shared experience is strongly felt and delighted in. The speaker is influenced by nature's power, and invites it to engage with her personal feelings.

A timeless winter

That wants to be now

Will go on taking shape in me.

Now everything can begin.

...

An image I have consciously

Broken like a shoulder on your hearing,

The inconstancy within constancy

That is the price of a month.⁵⁸

Thanks to the shared order of natural processes and the human self sensitive to spirit of other forces and elements, the borrowing of their connotations for picturing her own feelings is not blind, egoistic or narrow-minded, but it lets nature speak through the persona. The things around her are not speechless, but use her in the way martyrs or ghosts of the past have spoken through her, as though she were a 'door and window',⁵⁹ for them. The important feature that distinguishes McGuckian's communication with

⁵⁷ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 44

⁵⁸ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* 76

⁵⁹ Batten 182

other human or inorganic members is the mutuality of self-projection. The persona projects her feelings onto the surroundings giving them shape and wider meaning and the objects and natural elements, on the other hand, can be reincarnated through her and live in a new sense.

Happy rain, to lie completely still,

to look out at once on two seas,

or roll the grass by moonlight.

...

The month was a closer friend

than the day, the saddest notes of the deepening

river's voice went unanswered⁶⁰

An amazing parallel between the life of the emotions and external physical reality is created, which enables further work with this connection. Approaching the surroundings with awareness of the shared order and bond with the human spirit invites an unusual intercourse and communication between the speaker's self and external reality.

I kept colliding with the absence

of my own heavy family,

fiery as this year's gapes

that the dew considered heartless,

⁶⁰ Medbh McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2003) 52

as though they had grown deafer;

and addressed a conversation

to noone among us,

to the gardens framed by your windows,

that can imitate the shape of flowers

with their mere mouth and their empty fingers.⁶¹

The communication has its special characteristics in engagement with inorganic objects, but the mutual spiritual projection and interview does not exclude close persons either. This is explicitly expressed in 'The Finder has become the Seeker', a poem devoted to the author's memory of her dead father ("You desire to exist through me; / I wanted to disappear exhausted in you"⁶²).

In McGuckian's poetry, the specific concept of the single, all-embracing order of things and the shared inner reality introduces some very original paths for embodiment of private sensations by natural elements as well as of the natural spirit by relationships within human reality. The mutuality of projection offers a wider understanding of the world with its deeper spiritual laws, and promotes things of everyday reality to a new status. The organic and inorganic worlds are interwoven and spiritual lives of humans and nature inseparably entangled. This offers a new approach to particular topics, methods and figures of McGuckian's poetry and can give it a new meaning. In the poems' reality, the persona's surroundings speak to her, about her, and through her, and she conveys her feelings to the external world, about it and through it. On both sides, the spiritual depth is developed by this intercourse.

⁶¹ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 47

⁶² McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 41

Rhetorical Figures and Other Means Which Reflect the Author's Sense of Inhuman Speech

The specific relationship of the human mind and its surroundings is the central point of my comprehension of Medbh McGuckian's poetry, and its explanation deserved prior discussion in my thesis. It is necessary, however, to ground my impressions on an analysis of particular features in the poems, which can either support my understanding of the self's interview with the environment, or show themselves in a new light thanks to this understanding. The author's approach towards the human position within the order of things is built up by various means. It is also the impetus for further ideas, and more complex views of reality. In this chapter, therefore, I would like to offer a more detailed discussion of the poems' characteristics, and observe for instance their form, metaphors or similes in connection to my concept of the shared spiritual order. I will try to deal with the new light and meaning which is thrown upon the poetic figures through the particular approach and understanding, and also to reveal and follow the implications that arise.

In my account of the individual features of the poetry, I do not intend to outline them as separate pieces of poems' building material, but I want to refer to them with respect to their mutual link and relationships. I will begin with an analysis of the internal structure of the poems, which will further develop my idea of the role of the persona's environment. The poem 'The Sofa' illustrates the pattern that is to be found in the structure of many other poems. In its initial lines, a particular situation is directly pictured ("Your letter stayed unopened on my table"⁶³), which is afterwards escorted by rays and chains of thoughts, sensations and associations. The experienced, the actually perceived, and the imagined compose an interconnected circle, and illuminate one another with meaning and sense directed towards the complex content of the poem.

Since I was child enough to forget

That you loath poetry, you ask for some--

⁶³ Broom 350

About nature, greenery, insects, and of course,

The sun--surely that would be to open

An already open window? ...

... But I spread

On like a house, I begin to scatter

To a tiny to-and-fro at odds

With the wear on my treshold.⁶⁴

In the spiral movement, the development of the poem reaches its closing part, having conveyed the persona's psychic state in an immensely rich shape thanks to the engagement of connotations, reflections and inner links exercised by the active participation of the surrounding and remembered reality.

The closing lines themselves, in this poem as in many others, take on a very important role with their return to the initial sensation and situation in order to explain them further ("Somewhere / A curtain rising wonders where I am, / My books sleep, pretending to forget me."⁶⁵). However, as was suggested before, the personal psychic state that is disclosed in the final lines confuses rather than illuminates the content of the poem for the reader. In 'The Sofa', the very metaphor of books communicating with the speaker's state is repeated and refers to the former discussion of the private sensation. Nevertheless, the initial reflection of the sensation is affected by the development of the poem. The clusters of associations and thoughts, which built up the poem, deal with the sensation, flow around it as around an axis, and touch upon its defying shape from different sides. First, the speaker is sure of her understanding of her self and position and determined not to have it disturbed by the other person ("Still it is not my heart that

⁶⁴ Broom 350

⁶⁵ Broom 350

needs replacing: / And my books seem real enough to me, / My disasters, my surrenders, all my loss...”), but towards the end of the poem, she loses the certainty (“My books sleep, pretending to forget me”). The feeling is changed, enriched by the previous ponderings and connected ideas.

Similarly, in ‘The Field of Nonduality’ the sensation is introduced with help of a metaphor at the beginning of the poem (“Like a map your lips promised / when melancholy creased you / apron and rash and savage / uplift of stones”⁶⁶). After further explanation and observation, it is captured in the closing line with use of the same metaphor again (“you uncurtained a certain mountain / from a certain other / walked of the edge of the torn map / on to another”⁶⁷). This way of handling personal feelings suggests the entanglement of the author with the surrounding environment and a kind of faith in the support and help of the surroundings in the verbalization of the feeling. The self-interpretation is realized by communicating intimate sensations with the nature and things around. The initial image and feeling is developed and complicated in a new field of discourse thanks to the metaphorical language. The complication is very close to obscurity, indeed, but appears to be in harmony with the author’s view of world. Explanation of this observation, however, is to be left for the concluding part of the thesis.

In McGuckian’s approach to the surroundings, the artefacts are not speechless. They speak their own language out of their traditional connotations and symbolical meanings, and their speech is very important for figuring the persona’s feelings and conveying the meaning of the poem. The communication of the surroundings with the speaker gives rise to very unusual metaphors, similes and symbols, which are naturally accompanied by a rich variety of personification, as well.

Sometimes, the communication does not use any poetic figures, but pervades the poems in a furtive and veiled way. For example, in ‘Lemon with White Jug’, the speaker’s observation of her counterpart person develops in parallel to her perception of the landscape of the scene. The poem’s focus then proceeds from the outer environment to the inner world of the persons’ relationship while the perception of the surroundings finally fuses with the intimate musing upon the other person.

⁶⁶ McGuckian, *Shelmalier* 45

⁶⁷ McGuckian, *Shelmalier* 45

Now a dream begins to value
the fretwork of the small red crowd

to its *n*th foundation, the cool,
bleached mood in the languish
of your neck, the gospel-net
fletching of your arms.⁶⁸

Neither in this case has the external reality remained silent. It develops and broadens the author's expression of the human one.

During the communication with the environment, the metaphor, which is a very frequent figure in McGuckian's poetry, gains a special role. Speaking of the poem 'Next Day Hill', Michael Allen points out the central metaphor of pregnancy which suffuses the poem "to link the woman who speaks and the poem through which she speaks".⁶⁹

Like a room decorated

At different periods you will feel it

Like a draught, a shaft of white coming

Long-postponed out of a blue room,

⁶⁸ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 67

⁶⁹ Allen 292

the thin, straight stalk of a woman.

The metaphor communicates between the person's feelings and the scenes in the poem. She feels herself changing just like the room decoration changes during the year, and she conveys the sense of anticipation of the new life by describing the scene in a room that is blue for her.

Frequently, metaphorical expressions or chains of metaphors serve not only as direct means of conveying the author's sensations, but also of expressing her understanding of inner relationships within external reality itself.

The darkness is not purer,
opening its bomb doors
to a carpet of night-offensive bombs
devouring the precious air
from the blast-proof windows.⁷⁰

She listens attentively to the inorganic world and lets the darkness act and assert its nature. Personified, it opens the door for bombs and enjoys the night air. In this complex metaphor, which is not a straightforward reference to a particular human feeling, the author shows her respect for the spirit of nature and her own speech.

Metaphors are also tied with the author's promotion of objects' meaning and illustrate the closeness of the external reality to her personal world ("I like the wordlessness of countries changing / into the next, of being spilt from one world / to its brother, where sky may become weather"⁷¹). Often, they do not serve as attributes of

⁷⁰ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 37

⁷¹ McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* 32

single objects or modifications of one expression, but comprise all the lines of the poem. For the whole poem 'Reading in a Library', the persona becomes a book.

You wake me up with the name

I carry inside me like a first

language. It becomes needless

on your lips, slightly grey, a waste

of light I swallow like a syrup.⁷²

The metaphor, no matter how concise, is not merely means of description of a scene or sensation, but it reflects the singleness of order by linking its different realities. It does not borrow strange elements merely to refer to the human world, but mirrors the communication between the two and their closeness. This poetic figure is used for path through the inner world of seasonal changes and natural forces up to the understanding of human states, for example in the poem 'The Wake Sofa'.

You change by what I hear of you

into the dim fluid of a year,

but when tables are crowded with flowers,

and autumn deepens its flame again,

I will be fertilised only by your thinking it.⁷³

⁷² McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* 33

⁷³ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 30

Hand in hand with metaphors and with the concept of speaking things, personification goes (“The house dreams / In the skip of my sentence”⁷⁴; “Spring skims the garden with its wintry eyes”⁷⁵). Very often, however, it is hard to distinguish between personification in the usual sense of the term and the case when the persona herself borrows the inanimate object and handles it while leaving it rather passive (“A timeless winter / That wants to be now / Will go on taking shape in me / Now everything can begin”⁷⁶). The acting and speaking of non-living things is then part of the explicit interview with the human being (“August and the second half of the year / that has never lived either in me / or with me / reopens eyes...”⁷⁷), rather than personification of their own nature.

As in metaphors, in similes the author’s view of the link between the human and the inanimate world is expressed. Observation and some way of personal understanding of laws of both of them, for instance pondering a ship coming to harbour, is a condition for their mutual mirroring.

I would read these words to you,

Like a ship coming in to harbour,

As meaningless and full of meaning

As the homeless flow of life

From room to homesick room.⁷⁸

In this poem, the similes pile into a chain of associations and contribute to the explanation of the persona’s attitude to the listener of her words. In other cases, the simile is innovatively combined with the reincarnation of a natural element, for example

⁷⁴ McGuckian, *Marconi’s Cottage* 45

⁷⁵ McGuckian, *Marconi’s Cottage* 48

⁷⁶ McGuckian, *Marconi’s Cottage* 76

⁷⁷ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 44

⁷⁸ Broom 357

("I kept colliding with the absence / of my own heavy family / fiery as this year's grapes"⁷⁹). Thanks to its involvement in the depiction of the speaker's mood, the fruit is actually personified. In McGuckian's interview with surrounding reality, all the individual rhetoric figures and their roles intertwine.

I regard the symbol as the most specific trope in Medbh McGuckian's poetry. This figure is also very important for Michael Allen's essay, which considers the obscurity of McGuckian's poems. Symbolic meaning that pervades many poems in *The Flower Master* adds new content to them and is thus a crucial source of their obscurity, in Allen's opinion.⁸⁰ For example in 'The Gardener', the theme of life stages is disclosed in its symbolic level only towards the end of the poem, thanks to the image of the ringing sickle.

For as long a time as I could hold my breath

I would feel your pulse like tangled weeds

Separate into pearls--the heart should rule

The summer, ringing like a sickle over

The need to make life hard. ...

I will return later to Allen's idea of the verse's obscurity and confront it with my approach. To conclude my analysis of rhetorical figures in McGuckian's poetry, I wish to discuss the specific character of the symbol in her poetry. In many poems, symbolical expressions seem to be understood and respected in their own nature, not used purely for reference to a different object or feeling. In literature and in other arts, the symbol, unlike the metaphor, usually has a more general or traditional value, conventionally understood reference and connotations, and wider range of meaning. In

⁷⁹ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 47

⁸⁰ Allen 289

McGuckian's poetry, many symbolical expressions retain their inner and temporary meaning in the particular situation ("the sea is made to repeat little phrases / such as 'the moon is pretty' / from all its wakeful windows"⁸¹). The window can be understood as a clear symbol of openness, speech, communication with the sea, but the adjective *wakeful* adds a unique character and meaning to the window, and the whole phrase seems to carry its figurative meaning particularly as a natural attribute of the sea. Symbols are respected with their spirit and not torn out of their own inner relationships.

Very often the symbol is developed by associations that seem to arise from its own nature and independent existence. It ceases to play the role of the plain conventional connotation, but lives its own life. A personified ship, for example, can in her sleep recall a beetle with wing-cases.

A deep ship moved
under his feet as she lay
cleared for sea, and slept,
her darkened sails
loaded with dew.⁸²

In 'Springwater' and 'The Melusine' a very traditional symbol of a kiss appears. Nor in these poems it fails to mean a touch, an encounter, an influence either of the folk-tale creature or of the stream, but in both cases, the meaning of the kiss does not end with the usual extra-textual reference. It is developed in greater depth and loaded with further allegorical meaning.

Her kisses are so light,

⁸¹ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 44

⁸² McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 13

You have to kiss her, and kiss her,

The last one is the one

To be pitied.⁸³

Without unwrapping the additional

meaning of her unfired kiss

we could look out through her thoughts

that brightened the river like April.⁸⁴

Like other tropes, the symbol links actual themes of the poems with their deeper meaning and the author's reflection of relationships within the natural order. As Declan Kiberd states, McGuckian often begins with a figure and that she "feels her way back to reality, as if by touch."⁸⁵ She thus infers from the symbol or image "an inkling of a distant world", and by the way the figures are used she discloses to the reader her respect for the order of inhuman elements. Within their communication with human feelings, the symbol's own spirit and language enriches the human world.

Another aspect of McGuckian's poetry connected to the voice of things is the reincarnation. I have already talked about past human spirits and heroes that are reincarnated in the speaker's mind and speak through her ('To my Grandmother'⁸⁶, 'The Finder Has Become the Seeker'⁸⁷) and about inorganic objects, for example a house, which become alive through her interest, respect for their nature and her readiness to let them talk to her and embrace her own spirit.

⁸³ McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* 20

⁸⁴ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 68

⁸⁵ Kiberd 1410

⁸⁶ McGuckian, *The Flower Master* 16

⁸⁷ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 41

... Hands holding cabbage roses,

opening night roses, keep her fireplace

filled, till the evenings stretch

warm and comfortable through her hair

(‘February House’⁸⁸)

In what follows, I would like to discuss the background and impetus for the concept of reincarnation, and link it with other features of the verse. When analysing poems dedicated to the author’s daughter, Guinn Batten suggests McGuckian’s concept of the life beginning as reincarnation, as metamorphosis (“The more it changed / The more it changed me into itself, /Till I regarded it as more real / Than all else,”).⁸⁹ Behind the author’s idea of metamorphosis of the human soul, there is her attitude towards the spirit as a voice that is not inseparably tied to one body, but is rather a member of the whole order of things. Therefore, it can also be free to transcend the seeming borders between the order’s individual elements, either in communication, or in reincarnation.

The speaker’s identification with other spirits functions within her intercourse with objects, as well. Batten supposes that the surrounding objects enclose and imprison the speaker and “are more alive, more connected to the world than she”.⁹⁰ This would mean that she opens her mind and invites other spirits to dwell inside and speak through it instead of her own voice. Such an invitation must be supported by a certain understanding of the surrounding inhuman world. The speaker plunges into the reality of the inorganic world; she has to use own human experience in pondering upon the different world, but at the same time she tries to forget the bond with her own human reality and open her mind to the other one. It is a kind of communication. In ‘The Face

⁸⁸ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 39

⁸⁹ Batten 182 - 182

⁹⁰ Batten 182

of Earth', for instance, the Earth's spirit is observed, awakened and mediated upon through the persona's voice. The reincarnation is possible only thanks to the mutual openness and invitation, though, and I would thus talk rather about a kind of communication instead of a speech through the other's mind.

Now his private breath,
so easily pacified,
is in many ways an almost ideal
face. I have drowned in him
and his small elm coffin
of the English kind
keeps my vision in.⁹¹

The communication between different spirits suggests the shared order of things and enables identification across the boundaries of seemingly different realities. Out of the intercourse of human and inhuman elements, original self-portraits of the speaker as well as the surrounding objects and natural forces develop, and the language of expression and description concerning either of these sides is extended.

A timeless winter
That wants to be now
Will go on taking shape in me.

⁹¹ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 12

Now everything can begin.

...

A secret year, a secret time,

Its flight is a written image

Of its cry, its capacity for sound

I call spring, the experience

When the sky becomes a womb,

And a vision of rivers slanting

Across the doubly opened page

Of the moon turns her into a verb.⁹²

The timelessness of winter, for example, is an attribute sensed in nature during this season, but its expression can have shape and carry meaning only thanks to the human concept of time. Such winter is then born inside the persona and its quality thus metaphorically pictures human feeling. Vice versa, a metaphor from the human environment can describe the natural spirit, for example when the sky becomes “a womb” and then “a verb”. Spiritual rules of the two environments merge.

After discussing the voice of inhuman spirits in the poetry I would like to discuss McGuckian’s attitude towards language, which illustrates her view of reality in a certain sense. The author explores the reality that lies behind words and she paradoxically manages to reach it by words. In this process, she unties the human language from its conventional functions and uses it freely for its own purposes. When Shane Murphy analyses Medbh McGuckian’s treatment of language, he cites the

⁹² McGuckian, *Marconi’s Cottage* 76

author's own comment: 'I have a certain number of gathered words that I try to mould into a coherent, readable argument that might parallel what is going on deep in my subconscious or somewhere unreachable by words'.⁹³ She tries to get behind words being aware of the slavery that is thrown upon human thinking by language. Murphy even talks about the author's antipathy to English which she considers 'a foreign medium'.⁹⁴ McGuckian's poetry is thus pervaded by the estrangement from the English language, and her way of expression by means of language may seem irrational. In fact, she struggles not to be tied by the language, but to govern it and make it succumb to her own view of world.

For many days I wasted daylight

Wishing for an extra moon, and trying

To get used to it enough to use

And keep it, almost wastefully alone,

In the spending day, in the doubtful

Chair, in the furrows of prayer

That were blowing up my minutes

Like voluptuous-to-be

Disappeared-into lips.⁹⁵

She abandons ordinary phrases and probable clusters of words in favour of quite unexpected ones ("extra moon", "doubtful chair") and invents own vocabulary that is more suitable for her expression than that of convention ("voluptuous-to-be",

⁹³ Murphy 199

⁹⁴ Murphy 200

⁹⁵ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 52

“disappeared-into lips”). The poetry thus has unusual combinations of words, syntactic constructions as well as long sentences that follow chains of associations and connotations.

... I learned to halve

my rainbeaten bedroom

in that evening-beach colour

was to comb out the sea

like a field of silk scarves

from an eaten nut.⁹⁶

Sometimes, all the language peculiarities tend to make us feel lost in the poems, but when we understand the constructions not as obeying the language system, the rational patterns, but as following purely the author’s personal attitude and imagination, we can shift our attention from the precise speech of the words to the seemingly irrational mosaic to which the language use contributes. We should not concentrate on the conventional references of words and on their function as language signs only, but perceive them also with their own power.

Language can tie us in a fake world while driving our perception, but when its embrace loosens, the power of language can be used for own purposes. This is the way McGuckian tries to work with language, and thus finds herself engaged in a constant struggle. She is aware of the multiplicity of worlds and of language as one of the means of creating a particular one.

⁹⁶ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 29

My tongue, coated red,

loses itself in the Englishness

of water, and their sense

of weather, a kind of water

in the form of feeling.

...

If the eye consists

of a million worlds, to show how the earth

is a house

exchanged for three tulip bulbs,

first define the eye⁹⁷

The might of language and its connection with human perception is highly respected in the poems. The burden of the established language appears as a theme in the preceding poem, which deals with its ability to reduce or define the world. On the other hand, in other poems, the author escapes this reduction by her free play with words, attention to the inhuman speech of natural elements and wide use of figurative language. According to Michael Allen, sometimes the power of the writing is in the language alone, and the poems approach a surrealist imagery (“Fruitlets, lies and love, debating whether / To remain adult or no, since within memory, eyes / That were prowling lakes had threatened snow”).⁹⁸ When making unusual connections between various elements and situations across boundaries between the animate and the inanimate world, McGuckian explicitly plays with the value and potential of language

⁹⁷ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 16

⁹⁸ Allen 293

as such. At the same time she touches upon surrealism and includes “surprises of language and association”.⁹⁹

Medbh McGuckian’s innovative use of language helps to build up her subversive imagery in the poems, and together with her sense of play gives shape to the idea of free coexistence of spiritual elements. The fanciful poetic structures extend her view of reality, but not just out of enchantment, but with serious notions behind them (“Bur I spread / On like a house, I begin to scatter / To a tiny to-and-fro at odds”).¹⁰⁰ The disengagement of language from its conventional rules combines with metaphors, similes and symbols, and complements these figures in their power to enrich the picture of reality.

Language with its laws is glasses for observing the world. It lets us understand and communicate our experience in it and it thus creates and shapes our reality. While listening to the natural world and employing metaphors and surrealist speech in the poems, McGuckian goes beyond the impoverished reality of one human language. She uses other languages when reincarnating voices of the past and of the inhuman; she lets the environment talk to human beings and broaden thus their concept of reality.

⁹⁹ Boland 137 - 138

¹⁰⁰ Broom 350

Conclusion

Before analysing the poetry of Medbh McGuckian, Michael Allen mentions different ways of reading poetry and suggests that in order to perceive the subterranean ways of imagery, “a complete understanding of a poem is not necessary”.¹⁰¹ At that stage of reading, however, McGuckian may seem wilfully obscure, and only a reading aimed at the meaning of the poems proves the contrary. In closer readings Allen argues that we realize her “way of distancing us fruitfully”,¹⁰² her sense that “dreams are part of reality”, her “riddling translation of life into artefact, artefact into life”¹⁰³ and other constraints for readers’ interpretation of her poems. From Allen’s point I wish to develop the link between the obscured meanings in McGuckian’s verse and different ways of reading her poetry and conclude thus my observation of her work.

During the introduction of my thesis I explained that I will not concentrate on individual themes within the poetry, but on the author’s concept, her treatment of them, on her perception of the world. With different approaches to reading poems, the question about their meanings arises. Where should we look for the meaning of a poem, or should we strive to reach it at all? Answers to this question are different for different poets and different time. In McGuckian’s case, I perceive the various attitudes to her poetry as tied to its characteristic features and to the author’s particular view of reality.

McGuckian offers different themes, feelings and experience wrapped up in very complex metaphors, similes, symbols and irrational use of language. Nevertheless, the lack of lucidity is not wilful, indeed. In my opinion, by considering her view of relationships between us and our surrounding reality, we can get to the message of the poems. In the world of the author’s poems, the human surroundings share reality with people’s selves. Their different spirits communicate and gain shape thanks to this mutual communication, reincarnation and identification. The past as well as the inorganic can merge with the concrete personal inner world. The narrow reality of the fenced-in human world with separated language is transcended by the speech of the inhuman spirit through metaphors or symbols, and by the free life of the language of the

¹⁰¹ Allen 287

¹⁰² Allen 288

¹⁰³ Allen 294

poems, in general. When persons can change “into the dim fluid of a year”¹⁰⁴, when a ship can be “deep” and have “sails loaded with dew”¹⁰⁵ and when a grey name can be swallowed “like a syrup”¹⁰⁶, we listen to a language whose denotations and connotations are extremely extended and we are introduced to much wider reality.

By our treatment of language and our communication with the environment, we create the spiritual world we live in. Personas in McGuckian’s poetry communicate and disclose their feelings and experiences within their purely personal attitude towards the natural and spiritual order of things. Therefore, what is usually called the meaning or content of a poem is less or more obscure to the reader, who has his or her own relationships and means of creating reality. It is not necessary, in my opinion, to strive to capture the concrete “meanings” and messages of the individual poems, but to understand another meaning of McGuckian’s poetry; her refusal of the conventional perception of human reality as being a mere construct dependent upon the language, and her reflection of the idea of broadened reality based on enriching communication and coexistence with different spirits.

The various tropes in the poetry appear not to provide a link to some distant world, but directly to ours. They shape it by their speech and extend its borders. When reading McGuckian poetry then, we should not be discouraged by resistant and obscure meanings of individual poems, but we can turn our attention to their way of handling human perception and be inspired by the mirrored opportunity to create our own human reality.

¹⁰⁴ McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 30

¹⁰⁵ McGuckian, *The Face of the Earth* 13

¹⁰⁶ McGuckian, *Had I a Thousand Lives* 33

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Summary

Ve své bakalářské práci se zabývám poezií současné severoirské básnířky Medbh McGuckian. V jejích básních se objevují rozličná témata, od otázek velmi osobních až k problémům národní identity a historie, a skrz verše promlouvá někdy čistě ženský element, někdy hlas pečující matky nebo dospělé dcery, jindy duch irské kultury a společnosti. V této práci však nesleduji jednotlivé náměty a oblasti zájmu autorky, ale zaměřuji se na prvek, který všechny její básně a témata sjednocuje, na její specifické vidění světa, vztah ke každodennímu okolí lidského subjektu a zvláštní realitu, kterou básně jako větší celek vytvářejí.

V básních McGuckian nejsou příroda a objekty běžného života pouze odděleným světem a vnějšími elementy, které mohou v poezii sloužit jako metafora nebo jako oblast pro zrcadlení lidských pocitů. Jsou chápány a respektovány nejen jako materiální ale i jako duchovní součást lidského světa, sdílejí s ním jeho realitu, stávají se součástí lidského já. Soustředím se tedy na poetické postupy autorky, které v mé interpretaci zobrazují a osvětlují tento její svět. Jednotlivá témata nemohou být zanedbaná, ale stávají se v tuto chvíli jen prostředkem pro vyjádření právě osobního pohledu na skutečnost, který sleduji.

Podobně jako náměty básní, ani kulturní pozadí básnířky nemůže zůstat nepovšimnuto. Poskytuje přinejmenším konkrétní otázky jako podnět, pole nebo nástroj pro poetickou expresi a pro sebereflexi, je autorčíným spojením s realitou. McGuckian proto krátce představuji v irském literárním kontextu zejména v souvislosti samotné role irského básníka v jeho národní kultuře. Podle Eavan Boland básník vždy konfrontoval své osobní dojmy a zájmy s národním očekáváním a s dobou se měnil pouze způsob této konfrontace.¹⁰⁷ I současní básníci, jejichž poezie je osobnější a méně svázaná s národní otázkou, jistým způsobem navazují na předešlou literární tradici a jejich kulturní pozadí se stává cestou pro osobní vyjádření a chápání obecných vztahů ve světě. Poezie žen spisovatelek přinesla po jejich dlouhém mlčení v průběhu irské historie nový pohled na národní kulturu i identitu a v rámci jejich zvláštní pozice v irské literatuře představuje Medbh McGuckian své originální vidění reality. S historií svojí země je její poezie svázaná nejen původem a kulturním pozadím, ale také konkrétními tématy, které v souladu s autorčíným otevřeným nasloucháním nejen přírodě a okolí, ale i svým předkům a národním hrdinům rozšiřují pohled na irskou historii a současnost.

¹⁰⁷ Boland 137

Ve svém eseji o současné irské poezii hovoří Guinn Batten o reinkarnaci, kterou v básních McGuckian podstupují postavy minulosti, když jsou zvány do autorčina vnitřního světa a promlouvají skrz ní.¹⁰⁸ Zkouším chápat tuto otevřenost vlastního světa lyrického subjektu v obecnějším rozsahu a rozšiřuji koncept reinkarnace také na přírodní elementy a předměty každodenního života. Svoji interpretaci podkládám rozbořem básnických figur a prostředků, které nejen podporují můj výklad autorčina pohledu na realitu, ale v rámci tohoto pohledu získávají nový význam.

Přijetí elementů okolní reality do vlastního spirituálního světa pozorují například při popisech neživotného prostředí. Objekty získávají neobvyklá přídavná jména (“unfired kiss”¹⁰⁹, “agreed window”¹¹⁰), která jim vdechují život, začleňují je do komunikace s lidským duševním světem a akceptují je jako jeho organickou součást. Oba světy se prolínají a vytvářejí jednotnou realitu, ve které je těžké rozlišit mezi projekcí pocitů lyrického subjektu do jeho okolí a mezi nasloucháním přímo duši okolního prostředí.

Mnoho básní Medbh McGuckian má podobnou strukturu. Začínají expozicí konkrétní scény nebo děje. Mohou popisovat neživý předmět, představovat lyrický subjekt v krajině určitého ročního období nebo přemítat o autorčině zemřelé blízké osobě. Po několika úvodních verších se však často objekt nebo děj stane bránou k řetězci konotací a asociací, které vnesou do básně osobní prožitky a pocity. Proběhne rozhovor mezi lidským subjektem a okolním prostředím nebo vzpomínkami a v závěru básně se autorka vrací k intimnímu pocitu, jehož vyjádření je už obohaceno a rozšířeno o vnitřní spirituální souvislosti s okolním prostředím a o inspiraci jeho vlastním duchem.

Ve vzájemném rozhovoru mezi lidským vnitřním světem a řádem přírody a neorganických věcí je umožněno zároveň nové vyjádření současného pocitu, ale i otevření prostoru pro vlastní řeč mimolidského světa. Dochází k metamorfóze ducha, který je v poezii McGuckian volně pohyblivý v jednotném společném řádu věcí a v básních může nechat promluvit vztahy a zákony neživých věcí, přírodní elementy i zemřelé osobnosti. Hranice mezi různými světy v prostředí lidské reality jsou překračovány, je respektována jednota společného řádu a soužití s okolím je v básních

¹⁰⁸ Batten 182

¹⁰⁹ McGuckian, *The Currach Requires No Harbours* 68

¹¹⁰ Medbh McGuckian, *Shelmaliar* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1998) 41

pociťováno nejen fyzicky, ale i psychicky. Objekty okolní reality tak dostávají pro realitu lidskou hlubší význam.

Autorčin pohled na postavení lidského subjektu v okolní realitě a jeho komunikaci s ní se v básních odráží specifickou podobou a použitím metafor, přirovnání a ostatních básnických prostředků. Nemohou být sledovány jako oddělené prvky, jejich funkce se prolínají a společně zrcadlí roli přírodních sil a neživých věcí v básních. S konceptem prohloubení sebepoznání a sebevyjádření díky naslouchání jazyku okolních věcí je spjata široké použití alegorie a personifikace. Intimní pocit je vyjádřen metaforou z přírodního prostředí nebo folklóru (například setkání s meluzínou), jejíž vlastní vnitřní souvislosti jsou potom upřednostněny a báseň ji rozvede v alegorický děj (chování meluzíny, jistá forma rozhovoru s ní). Často potom dochází k velmi komplikovanému propojení mezi osobním prožitkem nebo stavem a okolním prostředím, kterému je prožitek otevřen.

Objekt, přírodní síla nebo roční období nejsou pouze vypůjčeny se svými tradičními konotacemi pro projekci lidského prožitku. Lyrický subjekt naslouchá jejich vnitřnímu světu a nechá si jím vést k pochopení vlastních pocitů. Proto i symbol má v poezii McGuckian zvláštní podobu. Například symbol polibku, který se objevuje velmi často, si sice udržuje své konvenční denotační spojení s aktem předání něčeho osobního, promluvy, nebo omámení, ale jeho význam je podle konkrétních případů rozvíjen dále. Často může symbol prostřednictvím alegorického děje promlouvat svým vlastním jazykem a žít vlastním životem, který jako by nebyl svázan konkrétním použitím symbolu v básni, ale naopak rozvinut, pozorován a vyslechnut.

Tyto různé okamžiky promluvy s okolním prostředím směřují k autorčině otevřenému postoji k identifikaci lidského já se světem, který stojí zdánlivě mimo něj. Madbh McGuckian tak dává možnost vzniknout originálním portrétům lyrického subjektu i imaginativním a spirituálně obohaceným popisům krajiny a objektů. Pouze ve společné realitě a vnitřním řádu, který je v básních respektován, může docházet ke komunikaci nebo identifikaci mezi lidským a nelidským světem a k vzájemnému obohacení jejich vyjádření.

Sledování vzájemné komunikace lidské mysli a jejího okolí v poezii McGuckian mě dovádí k rozboru jejího pojetí jazyka. Právě uvědomění si lidské řeči jako svazujícího nástroje myšlení a vidění světa ilustruje její specifický přístup k realitě. I když paradoxně prostřednictvím slov, autorka se snaží proniknout za ně často iracionálním a místy až surrealistickým jazykovým vyjádřením. Ať už díky této

nespoutané hře s jazykem nebo díky specifickému užití tropů se snaží vymanit z diktátu jazyka a naopak ho podrobit vlastním účelům. Pokouší se zapojit právě řeč řádu přírody a života okolních věcí a v rozhovoru s ní pak formuje lidské intimní pocity. I když na první pohled jazykově jasně srozumitelné, básně jsou velmi často psány právě tímto výhradně osobním jazykem a zdají se být nejasné.

V závěru své práce blíže vysvětluji svoji interpretaci této nejasnosti poezie McGuckian a zabývám se způsobem čtení a hledání smyslu jejích básní. Díky autorčině práci s jazykem nikoli jako s konvenčním systémem znaků pro lidskou řeč, ale také jako s vlastním nástrojem pro vyjádření řeči, která vzniká z rozhovoru lidského vnitřního světa s vnitřním světem jeho okolí, pointa konkrétních básní a témat zůstává uložena v tomto čistě osobním jazyku a tedy ne úplně a jasně srozumitelná pro čtenáře. Básně McGuckian ale nemusejí být čteny za účelem přesného pochopení jednotlivých sdělení a námětů. Jejich smysl může být nalezen právě v přístupu k těmto námětům, tedy ve jejím specifickém pojetí jazyka, sebevyjádření a rozměru lidské reality. V této realitě koexistují duchovní světy lidské, přítomné i minulé, přírodní i anorganické, neomezené jazykem konkrétní společnosti. Hranice lidské reality jako jazykového konstruktu jsou překročeny, je vytvořena realita vlastní, osobní. A právě tato možnost tvorby vlastní, nezjednodušené reality může být smyslem a inspirací plynoucí z poezie Medbh McGuckian.